

“Hindu-Muslim-Jewish Origin Legends in Circulation between the Malabar Coast and the Mediterranean, 1400s-1800s”

Ophira Gamliel, University of Glasgow, PI, and Ines Weinrich, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, PI

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and German Research Foundation (DFG), ref. nr. 508319569.

The disciplinary compartmentalisation between Arabic and Islamic Studies and South Asian Studies challenges anyone interested in analysing the intersections and exchanges between diverse religious communities across Semitic and Indic languages. Arabists rarely engage with South Asian textual production in Arabic, and South Asianists rarely consider the Arab World as culturally connected to India. Our project is about Hindus, Muslims, and Jews who were interacting locally and transregionally between the Malabar Coast (southwestern India) and the Mediterranean, 1400s–1800s, constantly moving between the Indic and Arabic languages and cultures. Analysis of these inter-religious and cross-cultural intersections requires bridging the disciplines. We propose precisely such a transdisciplinary analysis by an in-depth study of the indigenous origin legends of Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish communities of the Malabar Coast, asking how processes of religious demarcation were shaping and reshaping inter- and intra-communal relations. Since the Malabar Coast was a central node in East-West maritime trade networks, our key question bears far-reaching implications for analysis of inter- and intra-religious dynamics in Indian Ocean history in the long durée. Moreover, exploring the self-perception of Malabar communities is tantamount to countering the European gaze that identified and defined these communities as homogenous entities.

The self-perceived history of Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish communities of the Malabar Coast became the subject of competing and complementary origin legends that circulated in Malayalam, Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and European languages. The persistently recurring thematic core in these origin legends is the division of a once-unified kingdom called Malabar in Arabic and Hebrew, and Kerala in Malayalam. In all tellings of the legends, a Hindu king called Cēramāṇ Perumāḷ divides the kingdom and allocates territories to specified communities and local rulers, depending on the telling's community of origin. The Malayalam and Arabic tellings are the most elaborate in detailing territories allocated to various kings and chieftains, communities, port towns, and places of worship, and include an episode of the Hindu king's conversion to Islam and pilgrimage to Mecca. Cēramāṇ Perumāḷ legends circulated as far as the western Mediterranean while retaining several Malayalam names and terms regardless of the language in which the legend was told. The far-reaching circulation of the legends reflects ongoing geopolitical negotiations within and around Malabar/Kerala and its Hindu ruling dynasties. It also reflects the impact of the growing presence of European actors in Malabar on the local, cosmopolitan Indo-Arab communities, which shows in specific mentions of port towns and rulers in the region, in particular Calicut and the Zamorin, and Kochi and its Maharaja.

Some of the legends have received scholarly attention and are published, while others remain in manuscript and almost unknown in Western academia. Those studied were analysed primarily regarding their content, leaving aside literary and linguistic analysis. Moreover, the multiple tellings of the legend have not been studied together in relation to each other, let alone as the main body of evidence on the processes of inter- and intra-religious demarcation. It is not only the competing versions of the kingdom's division that deserve attention, but commonalities in narrative devices, which provide rich data for the analysis of religious demarcation, both inclusive and exclusive. For this pilot collaboration, we limit ourselves to texts in Arabic, Malayalam, and Hebrew, as expressions of Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish perspectives. Our selected source texts share the following criteria: (1) they all include the thematic core of the division of the kingdom, (2) they have all been instrumental in the construction of the history of each community, and (3) they all represent diverse and complementary routes of circulation locally and transregionally until the 1800s.

Source texts:

- Anon. *Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmāḍ* (Story of the Emperor Perumāḷ)
India Office, MS Loth 1044, fol. 81b–104b; BM MS Or. 1738, fol. 71b–93b.
- Aḥmad Zaynaddīn al-Ma'barī al-Malībārī (d. 1579-83). 1985. "Fī bad' zuḥūr al-Islām fī Malībār (On the Origins of Islam in Malabar)." In: *Tuḥfat al-mujāhidīn* (Gift of the Strugglers for Jihad), ed. Muḥammad Sa'īd aṭ-Ṭurayḥī. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Wafā', pp. 223–32.
- Anon. *Mawlūd Tājaddīn al-Hindī* (The mawlid of Tājaddīn al-Hindī)
1894 (lithograph, 18 pp.).
- Anon. *Kēraḷōlpatti* (Origins of Kerala)
published by H. Gundert in 1843 (lithograph) and 1874 (print, pp. 44–75).
- Anon. *Kēraḷanāṭakam* (The Kerala Drama)
print of Gundert's handwritten transcription (Sreenathan 2016, pp. 25–51).
- Yohanan Alemanno. 1490–1504. *Liqqutim* (Notebooks)
Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Reggio 23, fol. 39b–42a.
- David Rahabi. 1781. *Toldot Yehude Kuchin* (Chronicles of the Jews of Kochi)
Columbia University Library, MS Plimpton Hebrew 004 (columns 9–19, 36–38).